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ONE HUNDRED NINTH CONGRESS

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May 17, 2005

Mr. Scott McClellan
Press Secretary
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. McClellan:

I write to express my profound disappointment and outrage about comments you made about a matter involving *Newsweek* magazine, which smacks of political exploitation of the deaths of innocent and a shameless attempt to intimidate reporters from critically investigating your Administration's actions. Your comments are contradicted by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and stand in stark contrast with your actions involving the "Downing Street Memo." I urge you and your counterpart at the Pentagon to immediately retract the comments made yesterday, and – at long last – provide a full accounting of the Administration's actions in the lead up to the Iraq war.

As you are aware, a May 9th *Newsweek* report indicated that interrogators at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba flushed the Koran down a toilet as part of an interrogation. *Newsweek* has since retracted the story. However, as the magazine was reevaluating information received from its sources, it appears you opted to exploit the situation for partisan political gain by falsely laying blame on *Newsweek* for recent deaths in Afghanistan.

Specifically, at 11:23am yesterday, you declared in a public statement: "his report has had serious consequences. It has caused damage to the image of the United States abroad. It has -- people have lost their lives. It has certainly caused damage to the credibility of the media, as well, and *Newsweek*, itself." The Pentagon spokesman, Larry DiRita, made similar comments. Referring to *Newsweek*'s source, he said "People are dead because of what this son of a bitch said." The clear implication of these statements is that the *Newsweek* report had caused a loss of life in Muslim nations, presumably referring to the recent riots in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

First, this attempt to tie riots to the *Newsweek* article stands in stark contrast to the assessment of your own senior military officials. On May 12th, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Of Staff had reported on his consultations with the Senior Commander in Afghanistan about whether there was a causal relationship between the *Newsweek* story and the riots thusly: "[h]e thought it was not at all tied to the article in the magazine." The only conclusion that can be reasonably drawn is that, in contrast to career military officers, political operatives sought to

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score cheap political points by spreading falsehoods about *Newsweek*. The appropriate course of action is clear: you and Mr. DiRita should immediately retract your exploitative comments.

Second, there is – of course – a sad irony in this White House claiming that someone else's errors or misjudgments led to the loss of innocent lives. Over 1,600 Americans and tens of thousands of Iraqis have lost their lives in the Iraq war, a war which your Administration justified by falsely claiming that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. To date, your Administration has consistently blocked Congressional inquiries into whether such claims were the result of intentional manipulation of intelligence or, as you assert, a mere "failure."

Moreover, your loquacious response to this matter stands in stark contrast to your response to a recently released classified memo comprising the minutes of a July 22 meeting of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his cabinet which calls into question the credibility of assertions made by your Administration in its drive to war. Among other things the memo indicates that Administration officials were working to ensure that "the intelligence and facts were fixed around the policy," implying that intelligence was deliberately manipulated to prop up the case for war. The memo also indicates, contrary to contemporaneous statements to the American people and the Congress that the President had already "made up his mind to take military action." When asked about this memo, you claimed that you "don't know about the specific memo" – two and one half weeks after its release and ten days after receiving a letter detailing its contents from 89 Members of Congress (which has still not been answered).

Third, the public deserves to know what precisely the White House is asserting with respect to the mistreatment of the Koran by interrogators: are such reports categorically false or are they, in the words of one publication, "manifold?" For example, a May 1st *New York Times* report indicated that a Koran was thrown into a pile and stepped on at the Guantanamo detention facility and "[a] former interrogator at Guantanamo, in an interview with the Times, confirmed the accounts of the hunger strikes, including the public expression of regret over the treatment of the Korans." The incident where a Koran was allegedly thrown in a toilet was also recounted by a former detainee in a March 26, 2003 article in the *Washington Post*, and corroborated by another detainee in a August 4, 2003 report by the Center for Constitutional Rights. The question is: are you categorically denying that the mistreatment of the Koran occurred, or are you simply denying the *Newsweek* report is accurate on hyper technical grounds?

Mr. McClellan, the American people have grown tired of the venomous partisanship and lack of candor on the part of this Administration. When taken to task for wrongdoing, a pattern has emerged of this Administration viciously attacking its accusers. The cornerstone of our democracy is an open and accountable government, and the American people deserve answers – not distractions -- today.

Sincerely,

John Conyers, Jr.
Ranking Member